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Developments in Indochina

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The Senate election to be held this August will have competing slates of politicians, but President Thieu's Democracy Party remains in a dominant position.

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Since the major North Vietnamese attack against Vang Pao's troops at Tha Viang near the Plaine des Jarres two months ago, fighting has been minor. Casualties are low, and no significant territory has changed hands.

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Senate Election

The promulgation of the Senate election law this week means that the August election will be a contested race, but President Thieu's Democracy Party is in a dominant position. The National Assembly failed to override Thieu's amendments, thus retaining provisions in the law that are generally viewed as advantageous to his party. Two slates of 15 candidates each will be elected, instead of the 10-man slates chosen in the past. To limit the number of competing slates, each slate must put up a substantial deposit which will be forfeited if it fails to win 10 percent of the vote.

Some independent and opposition leaders are trying to draw up slates, but they may have trouble agreeing on candidates by 17 June, the apparent deadline. Leaders of the Freedom Party and the Social Democratic Alliance reportedly have discussed the possibility of a joint slate. They have also been in contact with leaders of other groups, including an An Quang Buddhist senator.

Some politicians outside of the government camp have indicated that they do not believe the election is very important. One Freedom Party senator says he expects his party to "go through the motions," but expects the Democracy Party to sweep the election. Recalling the one-man presidential election in 1971, the senator felt that Thieu's concern over the anti-Communist struggle would prevent him from allowing the senate election to become a truly democratic contest.

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The Trend of Military Activity

Since the North Vietnamese attacked Vang Pao's troops at Tha Viang near the Plaine des Jarres two months ago, fighting has been minor. Each side continues to denounce the other for cease-fire violations, but casualties are low, and no significant territory has changed hands. Local commanders in most areas have reached informal agreements on territorial control, as well as on arrangements to avoid clashes.

Most of the incidents in the past few weeks have been in central Laos. Sharp skirmishes have resulted as both sides have tried to move into areas several miles north and south of Muong Phalane that were unoccupied at the time of the cease-fire. In the northern panhandle, small Communist units two weeks ago began a half-hearted effort to oust government local defense forces from an enclave near the North Vietnamese border. The government troops have been forced briefly to abandon several positions, but appear to be in no serious danger.

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